Martin Radovan: A Prospector's Life

By Katherine Ringsmuth, Daniel Trepal, and Logan Hovis

In summer 2010, the Alaska Region of the National Park Service, through its Abandoned Mine Lands program with funding from the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act, initiated the process of physically closing dangerous mines at Radovan Gulch, located in Wrangell-St. Elias National Park and Preserve. Before NPS personnel could begin sealing adits, the agency had to comply with the National Historic Preservation Act and determine if the properties were eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places. After fieldwork and archival research, an interdisciplinary team determined that the camps, prospects, artifacts, roads and trails at Radovan Gulch maintained historical integrity and were historically significant on a local level. But the story went far beyond compliance; the examination of the site revealed a remarkable time capsule, preserving the life and work of the enduring copper prospector, Martin Radovan.

A 19-year-old Martin Radovan departed Croatia for the United States in 1900. He arrived at Ellis Island where his surname, 'Radovanovich' was transliterated to 'Radovan.' He gained railroad experience in New Jersey and in California, but after the 1906 San Francisco earthquake, Martin moved to Seattle. While there, Martin learned of a railway being constructed into the Interior of Alaska by two giants of American business: J.P. Morgan and the Guggenheims (*Radovan 1974*).

Martin arrived at Cordova in 1908 and found work building the Copper River & Northwestern Railway.

Figure 1. The limestone cliffs above Radovan Gulch in Wrangell-St. Elias National Park and Preserve came to dominate Martin Radovan's life as they dominate the landscape.

NPS photograph

After completion of the railway in 1911, Martin stayed in Alaska. He worked as a machinist for Kennecott Copper Corporation, and eventually, took a job with a hydraulic mining company at Dan Creek, south of present day McCarthy in the Nizina mining district, and began prospecting nearby creeks and benches for gold. In the 1920s, Martin began searching for copper in an ice-filled cirque on Glacier Creek, a tributary of the Chitistone River, later named Radovan Gulch in his honor.

By the late 1890s, copper was a coveted metal made increasingly valuable by America's desire for electric power. In 1900, Kennecott's world-famous Bonanza copper deposit was discovered in the Chitistone Limestone above the Nikolai Greenstone, a formation that dominates much of the visual landscape on the south side of the Wrangell Mountains (*Winkler et al. 2000*). Federal geologists and successful prospectors encouraged others to look for copper where the distinctly colored deposits meet (*Moffit and Capps 1911*). Martin Radovan, like nearly all the copper prospectors working the Nizina district for years before him, began to scrutinize every accessible linear foot of the contact zone.

Martin gained notoriety as a prospector when he laid claim to the Binocular Prospect, a copper outcrop above the greenstone-limestone contact high on the face of a cliff overlooking a glacial cirque. The U.S. Geological Survey had known about the outcrop, and had studied it - through binoculars - since the turn of the century. The vertical face of the cirque wall, and the location of the outcrop over 3,000 feet up, had prevented geologists from inspecting and sampling it. In 1929, the Kennecott Copper Corporation, always looking for more ore in the Nizina district, sent European mountain climbers to try to reach the Binocular Prospect. After a summer of attempts, the climbers failed to reach the contact (*Casley 1972*).

Martin managed to do what Kennecott could not. He reached the Binocular Prospect by following a precipitous route along the cliff wall toward the target. Martin was supported in his endeavor by his wife, Augusta Louise Iverson, a person of great significance in Martin's life. Somehow Martin, a brown-eyed, black-haired Croatian, who spent more time in a tunnel than in town, caught the attention of an attractive Norwegian bookkeeper who worked at the Kennecott Milltown. Martin and Augusta were married in McCarthy in 1914. Moving seasonally between the cabin at Dan Creek and the camp at Glacier Creek, she made a life with him in the Nizina country.

Augusta not only helped Martin build the steep trail to the Binocular Prospect, but it was her professional skills and steady income that allowed Martin to spend his time prospecting at Dan and Glacier Creeks. While Martin remained steadfast in working his surrounding claims, Augusta interacted with the larger community of miners and their wives. Augusta fished, baked bread, sluiced for gold, cut wood, called on neighbors and friends, traveled to town, usually on foot, scheduled daily life around the mail, and had a naturalist's eye for wildlife. Besides working at Kennecott from time to time, she supplemented their earnings by running the Blackburn roadhouse with Martin during the Chisana gold rush, washing miners' laundry, and assisting as the local postmistress and notary. While making a small income, she still managed to send money to her mother in Seattle. Martin also took part-time jobs when money ran short. Although their daily routine was gender-specific, Martin and Augusta shared a common vision. She not only made his dream possible, she believed in it, too (*Radovan 1930*).

Augusta died unexpectedly in 1944, but Martin continued his search for copper for the next three decades. Besides the Binocular Prospect, he discovered and staked other claim groups: the Low-Contact, the Greenstone, and the Triassic. He built a substantial camp

Photograph courtesy of the family of Martin Radovan

Figure 2. Later in life Radovan described how he discovered the Binocular Prospect: "Before I knew I was asleep, a vision came to me clear as a blueprint…I saw a great bed of ore in that mountain a thousand feet in—true solid rock—on both sides of the canyon….This is the vision of my dreams".

Geneva-Pacific Corporation photograph

Figure 3. After 1974, others could work at the precarious Binocular Prospect besides Martin.

on the banks of Glacier Creek near the mouth of Radovan Gulch. Alone and unaided, he hauled 400 feet of 3/4 inch steel cable six miles upriver on a hand sled and then succeeded in stretching it 325 feet across Glacier Creek for a tram he built to pull himself across to his creek-side camp (*Edwards 1965, Sykes 1980, Green 1994, Smith 2006*).

By a twist of fate, Martin was reunited with his long-lost brother Jack Radovich of Delano, California in 1951 (*Anchorage Daily Times 1951*). Jack, a wealthy vineyard owner, flew to Glacier Creek in hopes of reuniting with his brother Martin, whom he had not seen in fifty years. Jack wanted his Sourdough brother to return with him to Delano, but the family reunion did not deter Martin from his mining aspirations. After a string of disappointing leases and business arrangements between the 1950s and the late 1960s, the Geneva-Pacific Corporation purchased Martin's prospects in the early 1970s, giving Martin hope that the Binocular Prospect would finally be mined and his life work validated. In 1974, at age 91, Martin left Alaska to spend time with his family. The following spring Geneva-Pacific reached the Binocular Prospect using a helicopter. Before the company's findings were reported, Martin died. In their report, the sampling team reported that they were "stunned" to have discovered tools used in 1929 by Martin Radovan at 7,000 feet (*Geneva-Pacific 1979*).

Today, Martin Radovan's life continues to intrigue students of frontier Alaska. The Binocular story has inspired popular articles, chronicling Martin's life at Glacier Creek. He has left his name on the map, and geology reports tell

and retell the story of the Binocular Prospect, perpetuating Martin's feat in the collective imagination. Still, since Martin Radovan's death in 1975, Radovan Gulch has been abandoned. Over the past 35 years, natural weathering has damaged the structures, many beyond repair. During a routine site assessment in 2010, NPS researchers observed many deteriorated buildings. Unless the remaining structures are stabilized, they will collapse in the near future. Significantly, the site has not been disturbed by vandals, and Martin's possessions at the camp and adits remain much as he left them. These artifacts connect the place to the person and his lifestyle, and even the ruins present clear evidence of the prospector's presence. Thus, the seemingly valueless things Martin left behind provide us fresh insight into the park's mining past.

In many ways, Martin's life at Radovan Gulch fits a frontier image of a 'rugged individual,' but Martin never lived independently of the outside world. Though Martin lived seemingly isolated in his wilderness home, he consumed canned foods purchased through an industrial network that connected Radovan Gulch to distant markets. He used Gillette shaving cream, wallpapered his cabin, and seasoned his food with spices from around the world (*Spude et al. 1984*). He remained a creature of an industrialized economy, taking trains or planes to towns like Cordova, Chitina, Kennecott, and McCarthy, towns that replicated the material, institutional, and ideological culture of rural America. Rather than evading civilization, Martin fully participated in an industrial process that transported twentieth century American life into the heart of Interior Alaska.

Still, unlike many who left Alaska with dashed dreams, Martin stayed. Even after Kennecott abandoned its mines and railway in 1938, after McCarthy deteriorated into a ghost town, and after Augusta's untimely death in 1944, Martin remained at Glacier Creek. Immersed in a perilous landscape day after day, Martin picked through tons of rock and, over time, came to know in profound ways the natural environment between his creek-side camp and his tunnels dug deep in the mountainside. By employing rudimentary tools and near-obsolete technology, Martin perfected climbing, construction and prospecting skills at Radovan Gulch that inspired awe and respect from people who knew him.

The Binocular Prospect, although it never produced ore, reflects Martin's courage, his ingenuity, and his position as the "little guy," pitted against one of the most financially successful operators in Alaska history. Likewise, the Low Contact property, exposed in a slide path, reflects Martin's famed persistence and tenacity, and how he embedded himself in a dangerous and perilous natural landscape. Finally, the Greenstone prospect and camp reflect how larger, better-capitalized corporations, such as the Alaska Copper Company and the Geneva-Pacific Corporation, pigeonholed Martin's prospecting knowhow in his twilight years.

Indeed, the rationalization and scientific professionalization of mining after World War II rendered prospectors with his "practical" knowledge outdated. While the modern industry was still happy to examine the old-timers' claims and prospects, it increasingly applied the expertise of university-trained engineers and geologists to determine where and how to build mines in order to efficiently and profitably extract copper. For most of his prospecting life, Martin was completely dependent upon scientists to validate his claims, technocrats to mine them, and ultimately, absentee investors for the capital and ties to international markets to develop and sell the ore.

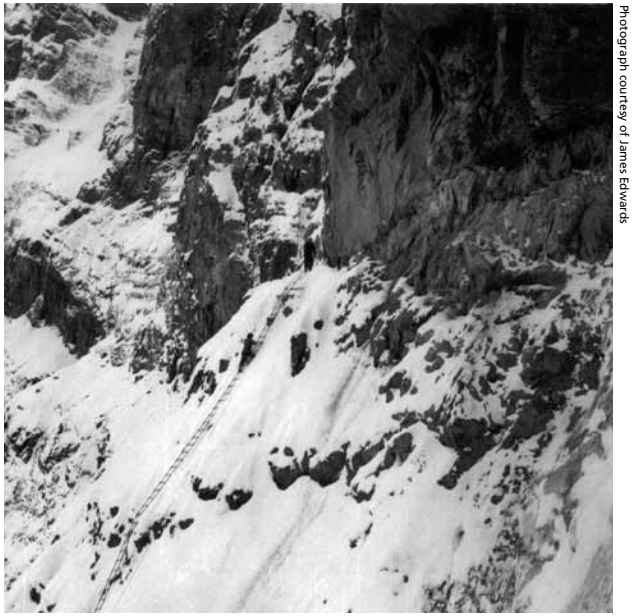
We can learn much from Martin Radovan. His

Geneva-Pacific Corporation photograph

Figure 4. Augusta Louise Iverson Radovan, on the right, snowshoeing with an unknown woman at Dan Creek, circa 1929.

Photograph courtesy of James Edwards

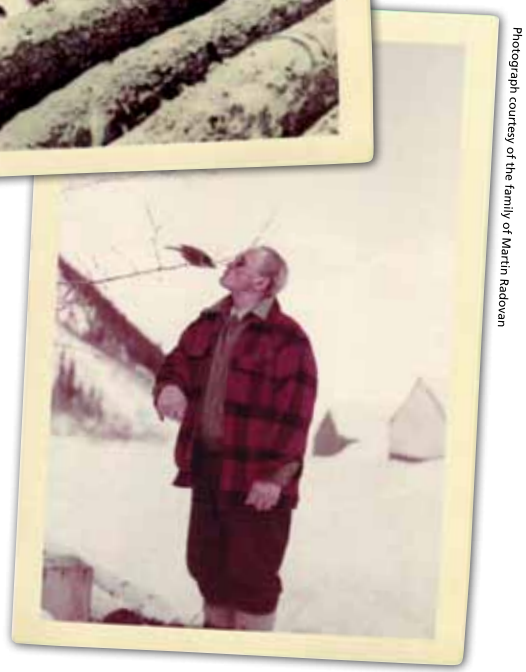
Figure 6. Radovan's Camp, circa 1961.



Photograph courtesy of James Edwards

Figure 7. Martin at work at the dangerous Low Contact Prospect, circa 1962. Simply getting to and from the prospect located in a slide path was a task.

Photograph courtesy of the family of Martin Radovan



Photograph courtesy of the family of Martin Radovan

Figures 8 and 9. *BootsBoy* and *KiKi Birds*. After Gussie died, Martin filed twelve new claims in 1948. Several were named for the things he cherished most: his pet fox 'Boots,' the grey jays he called 'Ki-Ki' birds, a bear he called 'Pongo Boy,' and his wife and partner of thirty years, "Augusta."

Photograph courtesy of James Edwards

Figure 10. Martin Radovan (center) at work with James Edwards (left) and an unknown miner, circa 1961.

NPS photograph

Figure 11. (Right) Archeologist Dan Trepal takes measurements at the Greenstone Prospect in July 2010.

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Sourdough Tells Of Early Days In Territory

(Continued from Page 2)

ping business that handled grapes and wine, and made himself a millionaire, not knowing that his brother was alive in the wilds of Alaska.

Meanwhile both Radovan's sisters died and it was until 1966 that the brothers found each other.

In Cordova in 1965, Radovan met a fisherman that spent his winters in Delano. He happened to mention that he had a brother in Delano, and the fisherman recognized the name.

The fisherman returned to Delano and related the news to his brother Radovich.

In the late fall of 1966 Radovich flew to Cordova to find his brother. He chartered a plane and it took two days for him to find Radovan, who was in the middle of moving from his summer prospecting to his winter cabin.

"Radovich talked to me a while, not letting me know who he was," said Radovan. "He asked me some questions, and then asked me if I had a brother. I told him I did, and that my brother's name was Jack. He put his hands on his hips and said, 'I'm Jack'."

Radovich wanted his Sourdough brother to go to Delano immediately with him, but Radovan had some good claims and he was preparing for the winter.

"I can't go, I have to lay in my winter supplies and lay out feed for the birds," Radovan told him.

"To hell with that," said Radovich.

"To hell with you," said Radovan.

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THERE WERE NO TV DINNERS IN 1915

Radovans wife, Augusta, not only had to cook dinner on early camping trips, she had to catch it. This picture was taken on a camping trip a few years after they were married, probably on an expedition to fill the meat larder.

Radovan finally agreed to go after his supplies were taken care of and he had spent time in Delano meeting his brother's family.

Radovan returned to Alaska and his claims turned out to be quite valuable. Radovan says that the U.S. Bureau of Mines sent geologists to his property and that in its Virginia offices the bureau has it recorded that his claim has 4.5 million tons of the richest copper bearing ore in the United States. It's some of the same ore that made the Kennicott strike big.

In 1968, Radovan says he sold exploratory rights to the claims to a friend who had the finances to back the exploration. Radovan received a $20,000 check, and was to receive installments on the rest of the payment every year until the rights expired, on June 1, 1974.

However, the rights were soon sold to a Mr. Thomas of Tampa, Fla., who hoped to back the development of the claim. In 1969 Thomas in turn sold the rights to the Geneva-Pacific Corporation of Illinois.

In 1969, Radovan spent the winter in Cordova, the first time he had left the claim for any length of time. When he returned the next spring he found all of his firewood had been burned, his cookshack was pushed off into a creek, and the company had set up its own camp.

"Since those guys set up camp all the animals have left the gulch," said Radovan. "There are shotgun shells all over the creek. My birds were tame, they went to them like they came to me, and last year they were killed."

"We only killed what we needed to eat here, or like the bear, where it was the only cure," said Radovan. "Now some people can get up there in a car and they kill everything they see."

"Copper is scarce and my strike is rich, but I don't have the money to stop them," he said.

Radovan plans to let the lease run out, and then try to have the government mine the copper.

Meanwhile, Radovan is leaving Alaska to go to Delano where the rest of his family is.

"They're so convincing down there for me to stay," said Radovan. "I don't have to do anything there, and I travel all over with my brother."

"I stopped in Anchorage to have my will made up, so I can leave my money to the poor," said Radovan.

Asked if he would ever return to Cordova, Radovan smiled and said, "Oh, maybe, I don't know. I like to help the kids there."

"All the kids like me in Cordova," he smiled.

"Radovich talked to me for a while, not letting me know who he was. He asked me some questions, and then he asked me if I had a brother. I told him I did."

Anchorage Daily Times (November 7, 1972), p. 3A

Figure 12. The Binocular story has inspired numerous popular articles, chronicling Martin's life at Glacier Creek.

story reflects broader episodes and themes that shaped Alaska's past, such as the contributions made by early twentieth century immigrants; the role of big business and the Americanization of Alaska; the dependency of the so-called "rugged-individual" on science, industry, and corporatism; and, through his hard-working wife, Augusta, the role of women at mining camps. But in the end, Martin came to Radovan Gulch because of a dream—a dream, which in 74 years, he never achieved.

Perhaps the most compelling question, then, is why did Martin stay? One clue comes from Gary Green, a McCarthy resident who befriended Martin during his last years at Glacier Creek. "Martin was a prospector," recalls Green, "and a prospector always has to believe there is something to find" (*personal communication, July 2010*). Martin's longtime friend Jim Edwards agrees, "He was a prospector; he had a prospector's head…he never gave up" (*personal communication, July 2010*). Indeed, Martin was an ordinary man who accomplished extraordinary feats. Although he never found his "copper mountain," the real value of Martin's uniquely preserved properties is the history they can convey to visitors about a way of life in the Wrangell Mountains. To residents who knew Martin, or simply knew of him, Martin's value is his unwavering faith in his way of life, a way of life that local residents – ordinary individuals themselves – continue to seek in pursuit of their own extraordinary dreams.

Photograph courtesy of the family of Martin Radovan

Figure 13. Martin's triumphs never produced great wealth; however, for his Binocular feat Martin gained lasting fame, for his endurance and ingenuity he obtained local respect, and through his personal relationships – whether it was with his family, friends, wife or wildlife – Martin attained constant companionship. Martin shown in the twilight of his years at Glacier Creek.

Photograph courtesy of the family of Martin Radovan

Figure 14. A sampling team for Geneva-Pacific reported in 1975 that they were "stunned" to discover, at 7,000 feet, a rock hammer and pick-ax used in 1929 by Martin Radovan to sample the Binocular Prospect.

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